

Brothers Inside: Fathering workshops with Aboriginal prisoners

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This paper describes a fathering program that has been operating for a number of years for Aboriginal men in the corrective system. The discussion groups focus on how the men see their role as fathers whilst in jail. The discussions examine ways of changing and developing new skills for them on release. The basis of the program is that just because they are incarcerated does not mean that they are bad fathers or not a father at all. The discussions involve learning from each other. We sit down and listen to each other about stories of being a father with a group of Aboriginal men. A lot of them are from the same background—where they grew up, how they grew up and their lifestyle. The fathers' program is an environment where no-one is judged for their behaviour, their answers or how they talk.

Background

Between 2004 and 2009, I developed Fathering workshops for Aboriginal inmates in local prisons. I had already been working to support Aboriginal Dads in the community and had helped produce a number of resources promoting the strengths of Aboriginal men and Dads.

The prisons' project is called *Brothers Inside*. Underpinning the workshops are beliefs that we all have strengths as Dads and that Dads are very important in the lives of their children. Many prison workshops focus on stopping particular behaviours (e.g. drug use, violence, theft), whereas fathering workshops engage men in a more positive process where the focus is on something very important to them—their children. This article discusses the experiences of some of these Aboriginal fathers, some of the challenges involved in running the workshops and what was learnt through the process.

Overall, we hoped that the workshops would help the men rejoin their families and communities successfully when they were released, strengthen the relationships between the men and the services that could support them in returning to their communities and strengthen the men's capacity to be fathers and father figures.

Brothers Inside came out of a school-based project in four schools in NSW. That project was all about trying to engage fathers in the school setting with their kids. One of the ways we engaged the Dads was to have father/child activity afternoons. A number of kids turned up without their Dads but had their Mums with them. Some said the Dad was away or at work but some of the Dads were in prison. We got a number of requests from the Mums to have a yarn with the men in prison. Because the prison was in the region, we could do that. I made a number of visits to the prison and talked with the Aboriginal staff to find out if a father's project would be relevant and how that could be organised. This step took roughly twelve months to complete.

The first workshops—us learning

Because we had already been working with Dads in the schools, we adapted that program to suit the fathers in prison. The first workshop was very challenging, because the setting had its own challenges and was so foreign to us. We learnt so much from this first workshop series in terms of the timing of workshops, length of the workshops and working in a prison environment. We ran the workshop for four hours a day one day a week over an eight-week period. We had a lot of interest in the program but, because it was over eight weeks, many couldn't attend. Some men were in transit to other prisons, some were due to be released or had court dates and such like, and so we learnt that the whole program needed to be conducted over a shorter period of time, ideally over two days a week for two weeks.

Yarning where the men are safe is a place to learn

We found there was a keen interest from the men to participate because this was a topic they really wanted to talk about and they were waiting for the right program and setting to come along. The good thing about this program is it's all Aboriginal men sitting around yarning about topics that never get discussed. It's a more relaxed setting—they have the same upbringing, the same issues growing up and lots of the same issues with their partners, kids and families. Because this was an environment where they could talk openly without being judged about being an Aboriginal man in prison, after being put down all their lives inside and outside prison, they felt comfortable talking in this way. Because they were talking about issues that are close to them, they 'held it in' until they're comfortable talking openly. Also the facilitators had to get to know the participants so they felt comfortable talking with us. They didn't want to disclose too much to anyone whom they didn't feel they could trust. So in the early part of the program, the facilitators talked openly about themselves, their families, their Mob, so the men knew we're just average fathers like them, not experts who know it all. This helped

to set the tone of the workshop so that both the participants and the facilitators felt comfortable.

Focusing on strengths

A lot of the topics focused on the strengths and skills they have as Aboriginal men and fathers. The participants really had to think deeply about what strengths they had, because it's not something that's usually discussed with them. Being in prison doesn't help when you're trying to talk about your skills and strengths. But when they get together hearing other men's stories, they realised they do have these skills and strengths and it's just that this isn't seen by the wider community. But in the end, it's the kids they want to notice that their Dads have these skills and strengths and that they are there for their kids.

Here are a few of the initial responses of the men in the workshops:

I found it very interesting speaking amongst other Brothers that are in the same position as me, in gaol away from our kids. I really like talking about our role as Dads and our strengths—strengths that I didn't even know I had.

Many of the Brothers were hesitant about doing this program as they did not want someone to stand there and tell them how to be a good Dad. We were all surprised and happy to find out this program was not like that and instead made us think about what it means to be a Dad and that we can still be a good parent while in gaol.

The men made specific comments on the key features of the workshops that made them good places to talk about these issues. S's child had been killed while he was in gaol. S talked about it in the workshop quite a bit. He said he had spoken about it more in the workshop than he had elsewhere and had found talking with the other Brothers more useful than when he had talked with counsellors about it. He said it 'felt right' to talk about it with his Brothers.

During the second day of one of the workshops, some of the Brothers reflected that the workshops were encouraging them to talk about their kids more back in the wings. Some of the Brothers said that the workshops allowed them to talk about issues they faced with their kids and how they dealt with them in ways that they normally did not. D said he went back to the wing and spoke, for the first time, to another Brother (who wasn't doing the workshop but had a child about the same age as his) about their children. P, who had been in and out of gaol for about 15 years, said they normally did not really talk about their kids and that it was good to be able to do so with other Brothers. He said that he had never heard the Brothers talk like this before.

Looking for learning

Despite the challenges many of them were trying to be the best fathers they could and did not want to be considered 'bad' fathers just because they were in gaol. The workshops allowed participants to consider positive options and to learn from what other participants were doing. As L said, 'I hope I pick up some things that help me to be a better father'.

T said that every time he rings his kids, he tells them how much he loves them and that he's proud of them.

A couple of the Brothers said they kept diaries to show their children later.

S said that he maintained a good relationship with his children by using the phone, even though his family hasn't been able to visit him in five years. He said that he even helps them with their homework over the phone.

These types of examples were the springboard for quite meaningful discussion about the ways in which the Brothers could keep in touch with their children and build relationships with them. Rather than focusing on what the participants were doing wrong (as often

happens in workshops conducted in gaol), Brothers Inside provided the men with the opportunity to be recognised as fathers, to discuss their strengths as fathers and to consider ways in which they could strengthen their relationships with their children. The Brothers responded well to this opportunity and we were privileged to be part of their journey.

Building the facilitator-participant relationship

Where possible, individual discussions were held before the workshops with participants to find out what they wanted from the course, some family background, their relationship with their family and elders, what contact they had with their families while in gaol, how being in prison had affected their relationship with their children and what they would like for their children.

During the interviews we also explained what participants could expect from the workshop, our expectations (e.g. attendance) and began the process of building a relationship. We were not able to conduct the interviews prior to some workshops, which resulted in problems arising that we believe could have been prevented by the interviews.

The workshops involved a variety of activities such as building a sense of community, yarnning together and videoing messages to their children. We also ensured that each workshop included creative activities such as drawing and writing poetry. These activities were taken seriously by the men and once again allowed a change in learning style. We tried to cover topics such as the importance of fathers, their strengths as fathers, communication skills, keeping kids safe (e.g. child abuse, discipline), experiences of being fathers, child development, what makes a good father, their roles as fathers, resilience and ways of strengthening their connections with their children. We also discussed the men's experience of being fathered themselves.

The Brothers ranged in age from 18 to their mid 50s. Most of them had between one and three children, but there were a significant number who had between 8 and 12 children (either with the same partner or a number of different partners). Some also had a number of grandchildren. Each workshop had one or two participants who did not have children. We decided to allow participants without children to take part because they intended to become fathers and were able to consider their relationship with nieces and nephews or other children. Not surprisingly, participants without children were more likely to drop out of the course or not to be as actively involved.

While we did not explore their offences, comments made by various men indicated that there were a range of offences including minor ones (such as driving while disqualified), drug-related offences including theft, and violent crimes such as rape, double manslaughter and murder. The length of sentences ranged from a few months up to 13 years. Some of the participants had been in and out of prison since they were teenagers.

C had a 2½ year old daughter who was in care because he was in gaol and his partner was using drugs. He was quite angry about the whole situation and expressed great frustration because he had been told that he could have a video link visit with his child but it had not happened yet. He said he was being ‘ripped apart’ by the situation and his frustration and anger kept coming up during the workshop. He was hoping the workshops would help him regain custody of his child when he was released.

P had been in gaol for over 10 years and was due for release in 12–18 months. While he had been in regular contact with his children (who were now teenagers) during this time, he used the workshops to help prepare him for his return home.

B had four children aged from 14 to 25 and also four grandchildren aged 8 and under. He considered himself to be part of the stolen generation, being removed from his family when he was about 10. When he was gaoled, his ex-partner stopped him from seeing his younger children and changed the phone number so he was unable

to ring them. He was hoping to gain access through the family court. His eldest son was in gaol with him for a while. They shared a cell for some of the time but the relationship was not easy.

D had two children (aged 10 and 5). D had sole custody of the 10 year old so the child went into care when he was gaoled. During the course he had the first visit with his 5 year old since being gaoled, but had not seen his 10 year old while in gaol. He said that the worse thing about being in gaol was not being able to hold his children and that 'it just tears me apart'. He said he had stopped taking drugs so that he could get better access to his children: 'It was drugs or my kids, and I'm not going pick drugs over my kids'.

M had two children (2 and 3 years) and said that when he first went into gaol, he quit smoking because he had to choose between buying cigarettes or ringing his family. By quitting smoking he had the money he needed to be able to ring every day. He said it was an easy choice and that he did not have any cravings because he knew why he was doing it. Making phone calls was not always an easy process. Men can have six phone numbers at a time (which have to be authorised by the prison and can be changed as often as the men wish) pre-set into the limited number of inmate phones. After six minutes the phones automatically disconnect and the men have to return to the back of the queue for the phone. Because M's family lived quite a long way away, his family could not visit often and the phone calls became quite expensive. Many of the Brothers found the process of making phone calls difficult.

After a workshop, T spoke to his daughter for the first time in about two years. During the workshop, we had discussed what he might say and how he might handle it. He said that the conversation had been 'funny but OK' and that our discussion had been helpful.

Some of the Brothers said they tried not to think about their children too much because it was too painful. As one said, 'I try to put it at the back of my mind, but they are always there'. They spoke about getting through gaol without focusing on 'all the negative stuff'. Likewise, some of them did not want their children to visit them for a variety

of reasons. Some of the children were scared when they came to visit, some felt their families were treated quite badly by custodial staff and were treated like they were criminals as well. One did not want his children to know he was in gaol and so told them that he had a job in a remote location. Others said that it could sometimes take nearly two hours to get through reception, and that their families could be patted down and be subjected to sniffer dogs. Some of them did not want to put their children through that.

The role of a father

Protecting their families, even when they were inside, was very important to most of them. Some of the Brothers said that if anyone touched their families they would take the law into their own hands to deal with the offender. They would not care if they were gaoled for a long time because their children would know that they stood up for them.

The Brothers believed that most people had no idea of what their experience as fathers in gaol was like. As one commented, 'Try putting yourself in our shoes and seeing what it is like being a father inside'. They wanted people to know that 'we are still fathers and we still have a strong sense of being a father'. Another participant said, 'even though we are criminals, we are still humans and still have families. We know how to show affection.' They felt that many people judged them without meeting them. While they may have committed a crime and were in prison, it did not mean they were all bad, nor did it mean that they were bad fathers. In particular, they felt that the Department of Community Services judged them as bad fathers regardless of their crime. They also felt that it was not always recognised when they tried to better themselves while they were in prison. One said he attempted to do what he thought was best for him and his children and did not care how other people might judge him for it. They wanted their children to know that they would be there for them, that they wanted

to have contact with them and that they were loved. They hoped their children would be willing to have a go, be happy and not end up in prison.

Many of the Brothers spoke about how it had been their mothers who held their families together and that their fathers had not been around much. Some did not have strong father figures in their lives, while others had a significant uncle, brother or pop who acted as a father figure. In one of the workshops, three of the Brothers spoke about how things started to fall apart for them (eventually leading them to prison) when the main father figure in their life (a grandfather, an elder brother and a father) died. Some of the Brothers spoke about how it was their children's mothers who held things together now. One of the Brothers said that his partner was the 'brains of the outfit', and that when it came to his family, he did not make decisions without her and that she 'kept me in line'.

Learning about fathering

One of the biggest issues in the workshops (besides issues related to being separated from their children) was how to discipline children. Nearly all the Brothers had been 'flogged' as children (e.g. with bare hands, thin branches from trees or electrical chords). Some of them thought it was too harsh and that they would never do it to their children. Others thought 'a good flogging didn't do me any harm', and that it taught them respect and to tell right from wrong. One of them commented, jokingly, that his parents' discipline had not worked because he had ended up in gaol. Most of them, however, said it was not their parents' fault that they ended up in gaol.

When asked about discipline, most of the Brothers said they would talk issues over with their children and try to see their side of things. Their actual strategies, however, were more authoritarian. Most of them believed it was appropriate to use physical discipline (within limits), although some preferred to use strategies such as groundings.

One of the Brothers spoke about how his children had smashed things up at the school and as a punishment he told them to pack up their things and get in the car. He drove for a while before stopping by the side of road. After telling them to get out and find themselves new parents he drove off, but kept them in sight. After his children started crying, he waited a little while and returned to pick them up. Most of the other Brothers believed this was an appropriate response.

It was a topic we regularly returned to, not just during the session on keeping kids safe. For example, K spoke about being in a pub late one night and seeing his 13 year old daughter out, which led to a discussion about how they might handle the situation. Most of their responses were initially quite authoritarian, but we were able to discuss other responses by using real-life examples.

I had developed a series of posters and a DVD promoting positive images and messages about Aboriginal fathers. The Brothers appreciated the positive approach (most images of Aboriginal men are negative) and the resources opened up significant opportunities for discussion. As in most workshops, some participants were more actively involved than others, but generally there was good participation. At times the men were willing to challenge each other about their attitudes towards fathering. For example, H (who was hoping to make contact with his children for the first time in 12 years) was not sure what to say or how to say it, so he was thinking that he would leave it to his daughter to ask lots of questions. The other Brothers said that he needed to take more of the initiative because he was the father and should not just leave it to his daughter. S said that his kids got into trouble no matter what he said or did and that his behaviour did not really influence their behaviour. The other Brothers challenged him and argued that, as a role model for his children, his behaviour did matter and that he had a large influence on their lives.

The workshop content attempted to achieve a balance between exploring their experiences and current roles, and input of ideas and

strategies that could improve their fathering skills. Part way through the first program, we learnt that some of the Brothers had been concerned that we would tell them how to be 'good' fathers and that we would assume that they were 'bad' fathers. Through the workshop we were careful to respect their experience and be non-judgemental. When we received feedback from them they said that they felt respected and listened to. It was important to the Brothers that we did respect their experiences and expertise.

Prior to the workshops commencing, the prison had established fathers and children days. None of the Aboriginal men had participated but following the second workshop, two of the men took part in a day. Brothers from later workshops also participated in further days. The fathering workshops created an environment where the Brothers were more receptive to take part in the days and provided an indication to staff about who could be approached to participate. Some of the Brothers said the workshops were the best courses they had ever done.

As facilitators, we needed to be flexible to cope with changes in attendance and being able to adapt agendas and process depending on the participants' priorities and interests. The men really appreciated the fact that we brought in biscuits and sweets. While this may appear a relatively insignificant part of the workshops, it demonstrated that the facilitators valued the men and helped promote a positive relationship between the facilitators and men.

Challenges in facilitating the workshops

There were numerous challenges with the workshops, most of which arose from the context of the prison environment. Lockdowns occurred at least once during each workshop series. Lockdowns could be a result of security breaches (e.g. a gun was found near the perimeter of the prison), cell searches, stop-work meetings or for some other reason (e.g. there was a lockdown on the afternoon of

the Melbourne Cup). Workshops that coincided with 'buy-up' days, when the men receive goods they ordered from the prison store, were more likely to be disruptive. We found that the participants were often more distracted on these days as they often wanted to make sure that they had received their purchases, they needed to settle accounts (between inmates) and were generally somewhat unsettled. Where possible we avoided buy-up days and if we were unable to do so, the Aboriginal teacher attempted to organise the buy-ups in a way that disrupted the workshop as little as possible. Attendance varied from session to session which interfered with the continuity of the program. As our main aims for the first workshop were to build relationships and gain credibility with the men, it did not matter too much for the first program. Attendance was much better in the other workshops, although at times there were still problems. Non-attendance occurred for many reasons, such as men being released or transferred to another prison, having another appointment (e.g. a meeting with their solicitor or appearing before the classification review panel or parole board), receiving bad news (e.g. having a re-classification rejected or family problems) or deciding the workshop was not meeting their needs. Workshops over a short timeframe (i.e. two to three weeks) were more successful than ones spread over more weeks. The shorter timeframe meant that participants were more likely to complete the workshops. But overall the workshops could not have occurred without support from prison staff.

Some of the rooms we had to use were not really suitable for the workshops (e.g. one was too open to interruptions, another was too small). Where possible the Aboriginal teacher organised us one of three rooms that were suitable. The one we found the most appropriate was a large room (used for carpentry) which had an outside section and was fenced off from other inmates. This meant we were less likely to be interrupted and less reliant on custodial staff to let us in. With most of the other rooms, a custodial officer had to be

present in the building or we could not proceed, which occasionally meant we were delayed.

Although most workshops have some challenging behaviour, the context of prison workshops meant that there was often the potential for incidents to escalate. Most of the incidents were relatively minor but, if addressed inappropriately, the situation could have become uncontrollable or the facilitators could have lost the respect of the participants. There is the need to have skilled facilitators who are able to address challenging behaviour in a non-threatening manner. At times we felt that the Brothers said what they thought we wanted to hear in the hope that it would help with re-classification (e.g. so that they were eligible for weekend leave) or when applying for parole. We needed to work hard to ensure that the workshops remained as genuine as possible.

Helpful aspects of the workshops

Having some older fathers in the group and some fathers who had been in gaol for a number of years was helpful. The more experienced fathers brought valuable insights to the workshops, while the people who have been in detention for some time could bring stability and an understanding of prison culture. Many of the Brothers had not had much contact with their children and wanted to build a relationship with them. They were often unsure about how to go about it.

The Brothers said they would like more information about their legal rights as fathers and would like the workshops to be recognised by the Department of Community Services. Many of the participants were mistrustful of people in authority and, like any workshop, the facilitators needed to demonstrate their credibility to each group. For example, at the start of the second series of workshops L asked if they needed to say anything and, if they did not, whether or not it would affect their certificate at the end of the workshop.

Something I hope to see come from these workshops is for the community/health family services and government departments, such as Department of Community Services, which work with families to recognise the value, the skills, the strengths and the importance of Aboriginal fathers to their kids, their family and their community. These agencies must recognise that things can be achieved with Brothers Inside and similar programs that will have a positive impact on the men going back to their families. If an agency has been involved with the family while the father has been inside, that agency needs also to support these kinds of programs for the Brothers so that the whole family, including the father, can be supported as a whole unit by these agencies. In the longer term, supporting the father as well will only make the family stronger and ensure a future for the children that is positive and not a future that includes crime and prison.

By talking about the issues in and around their family and kids in the workshops, the Brothers remained aware of the role and responsibilities they can still have while inside and also when they are released. It keeps them grounded, knowing that there is a life with their family outside the prison and that they will have an important role to play in that family. It reinforces that there is that family out there waiting for them, whether that's a partner and kids, or just the kids, knowing they will be welcomed back into the family environment.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, I hope that the Brothers are able to come away from these workshops knowing that they have particular skills and strengths as a father, knowing about communication with their kids and partner, and believing in themselves as a father and as a man. These men have a role to play, not only in their kids' lives, but in the making of a community, because sometimes the things we do as men

in the community have an effect on the whole community and more importantly on our family. When a Brother gets out of prison, the first place he will go is to his family. When he settles back in there, he will come back into the Aboriginal community and that is when, if men come together, it will make the community a stronger community. Brothers Inside helps the men to know where they sit within the family and the community.

About the author

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